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The Problem of Ideology in Biblical Studies

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Ideology is a key component to any social understanding of religion. Yet it also remains an issue which has not been adequately explored in biblical studies. In this article I trace the way ideology has been approached as an implicit part of the sociological and anthropological approach to understanding religion. Particularly as biblical studies has become more explicitly conscious of theological agendas that have seeped into modern scholarship the issue of a proper understanding of ideology and its criticism has become increasingly important. In this article I will first recount the way these movements in New Testament studies have highlighted the need for proper theorization of ideology and then using the work of thinkers in the Marxist tradition, attempt to begin that process of ideological theorization.

In a discussion of ideology in biblical studies it is useful to examine the way the issue has been dealt with by the discipline. The issue of ideology typically has not been addressed as a separate issue per se, but rather as part of a larger sociological turn in New Testament studies. For my part I wish to begin with John Gager's *Kingdom and Community* in 1975. I choose this work, not because it was necessarily right, but more because of the way Gager chose to do his work. Gager applied a cross-section of sociological and anthropological methods to the New Testament material, from Weber to Burridge, and for the first time attracted a wide audience to the possible benefit that social theory could have in a historical study of the New Testament.

In the same year as Gager's book was published, Jonathan Z. Smith also published a landmark article called "Social Description in Early Christianity" (1975). Smith separated the social study of the New Testament into four categories: social facts, social history, social organization, and social world creation/ maintenance. This last one, Smith remarks, has the greatest connection to social theory, while Smith deals with all of these with equanimity; a look at his own work shows a clear impulse towards the last.

The fact that this last category was most theoretical explains its appeal. The charge that Smith gave sought to carve out a new disciplinary niche that would allow a theoretically informed pursuit of the New Testament. The focus on theory here is perhaps the most important point. It is the pursuit of a faithful application of theory to the data that holds the most promise for Smith. Cultural context is not enough; real understanding comes with the process of redescription which involves the use of analytical tools and concepts which come from theory.

While I have started with Gager, Smith's review, entitled "Too much Kingdom, Too Little Community" (1978), provided a necessary corrective. Smith focuses on a paragraph in which Gager threatens to engage in precisely the kind of world creation analysis that Smith called for but notes that Gager missed the mark. So while Smith praises Gager's attempt at using theory, he notes that "Gager has not really wrestled with the implication of adopting a stance grounded in the presuppositions of the social construction of reality" (125). He argues that Gager's own theological blinders constrict the application of that theory. Gager, he says, has been unwilling to pay the price of following his method through to its logical end.

Gager was not the last of his kind. The field would soon enough be dominated by the group of scholars known as the context group with Bruce Malina as its most well-known name. The group started with Mary Douglas and ultimately embraced structural-functionalism which was subject to critique (Horsley 1994). While the context group had this methodological conflict, they still did ably fulfill one of the charges that Smith gave, which was careful discussion of social context. We have learned much about the social environment of antiquity, and without doubt much of the social description that Malina and others have done has made the field richer.

Yet the time was ripe for a more methodologically sophisticated approach. It is at this point that the ideological criticism movement was born which would ultimately spawn its own SBL group. The *Semeia* volume (1992), which introduced the ideological criticism movement, contained a variety of different approaches with more and less detail, and yet what rose to the surface was that theory was to be taken seriously and particularly that Marxist theory was now on the table.

The call for clarity in theory was concomitant with a vision of Christian origins which specifically eschewed theological explanation. Smith's own work in *Drudgery Divine* (1994) certainly moved in that direction. His classification of early Christianity as a Greco-Roman cult of the dead provided a first look at what such a perspective would entail. But without question the call was answered most fully in tire work of Burton Mack. The issue of ideology comes to fore (though not specifically named as such) as Mack begins his ground-breaking tome *A Myth of Innocence* (1988) decrying tire "big bang" approach to Christian origins. Mack argues the beginning of Christianity has been a black box that was secretly an avenue to theology. Ultimately scholarship presumed the resurrection was still the point of origin for Christianity even if it was reconceptualized psychologically as visions or ecstatic experiences.

Mack's work questioned this construction of the origins of Christianity in two ways. First, engaging in a detailed examination of the pre-Fauline literature preserved in Paul, he was able to present a plausible explanation for the development of Christianity through the intellectual labor of the Jesus people rather than apparition experiences. By employing tire thought models of the Greek Noble Death and the Jewish Persecuted Sage, Mack was able to account for tire development of the notion of resurrection as a tale of community vindication shorn of its psychological/spiritual baggage.

Secondly, Mack's work on Q asked whether New Testament studies had rushed too quickly to presume every community was Pauline-esque. Q and Thomas seemed to point precisely towards communities for whom the death and resurrection of Jesus was not only *not* the most important issue, but may not have been an issue at all. The Jesus movements saw meaning in Jesus apart from sacrificial redemption stories, instead focusing on the power of Jesus' message though word and deed. Mack then highlights two ideological considerations, on the one hand tire ideological constraints of the interpreters themselves that thereby limit and direct acceptable lines of interpretation, and on the other hand the ideology of the texts themselves often with competing social aims and goals.

Smith and Mack thus initiated a powerful new movement that continues today in their work as well as tire work of Leif Vaage (1994), hill Arnal (2001), and James Crossley (2006) to name a few. But it is the work of Russell McCutcheon (2001) and Hector Avalos (2007) that has moved this beyond being simply an alternative approach in New Testament studies to a full-on movement in religious studies. These scholars (whom I have called elsewhere the "new secularists") (Reed 2010) are part of tire vanguard of scholars who are unwilling to let religious

studies sit as the ugly stepchild of the larger academy but demand an approach to our subject matter that can boldly face our colleagues in history anthropology and sociology.

And the wider culture appears to have reached a moment where there is an audience for such an approach. Outside of the SBL there is a new movement afoot. The work of Michael Shermer (2003), Sam Harris (2005), Daniel Dennett (2007), Richard Dawkins (2008), and Christopher Hitchens (2009), the most prominent representatives of the New Atheism have likewise issued a challenge to the relevancy of religion in general in the twenty-first century. Often starting from September 11th, these writers have argued that the violence and hatred and irrationality that seems to characterize the "clash of civilizations" is the natural result of populaces that follow moral dicta formulated several millenia before. Bultmann sought to demythologize his way to an anthropology that still was valid, but the New Atheism questions the need for such intellectual gymnastics. Dispense with it all, they counsel, and recognize that the best of religion is neatly wrapped up in a humanism completely disconnected from religion.

The perspective of the New Atheism combines nicety with the New Secularism of people like Mack, McCutcheon, and Avalos, while the New Atheists sometimes verge perilously close to a kind of ethnocentrism, they are unapologetically modernist. Their furor against the dogmatism of religion is only slightly more than their furor against the more post-modern ideals of multiculturalism and cultural relativity. For them, there is no social explanation that can ever excuse the violent excesses of religion from honor killings to the murder of abortion doctors. These are all sanctioned ultimately by religion, and until religion is vanquished, we shall ever be beset by atrocities such as these.

Yet regardless of the somewhat dogmatic tone the New Atheists take in their approach to religion as well as the more objectionable positions they sometimes take (Harris condones torture, Hitchens continues to support the invasion of Iraq, and Michael Shermer's latest work (2007) embraces capitalism as the pinnacle of economic evolution); nonetheless, they demand a strictly naturalist perspective that eschews supernaturalism, demanding reason and scientific evidence in drawing conclusions. And this is an extra-religious studies position that sits well with the advocates of New Secularism who feel such is the appropriate boundary of the academy. Both the New Secularists and the New Atheists, then, are struck by the same problem: they are cognizant of the ideological nature of religion and religious interpretation. Both movements also bring attention to the way these ideologies manifest themselves in behaviors and practices that are ultimately counter to humanistic values that often the religions themselves otherwise purport. Proponents in both camps both argue the ideology of religious interpretation as practiced by scholars and practitioners equally requires a suspension of common rules of human dignity as well as logic and reason.

This is not to say that the analysis of the New Secularists is the same or necessarily congruent with those of New Atheism. The New Secularists often employ analytical categories that in fact reveal the rather ham-fisted approach of the New Atheism, functioning to reinforce the existing categories that only invert precisely the same ideological perspectives. Yet my point here is that there is a cultural moment when the unexamined nature of the religious presuppositions of both society and parts of the academy are being challenged. Both in the discipline of religious studies and in popular culture there is suddenly an opening that challenges existing unacknowledged presuppositions both in the study and practice of religion, while the New Atheists and New Secularists might in the end find themselves opposed on a host of theoretical grounds, their cultural *effect* is to challenge the current intellectual edifices that offer sanctuary to religious assumptions.

A brief example might illuminate here. A biblical studies class that I was teaching contained a student-led presentation on narrative criticism. The students rightly suggested that a determination of genre was necessary to understand a given text (there was the Genesis story of the fall). Presenting the genre alternatives of fiction and non-fiction, the students said quite confidently that the Genesis account must be considered non-fiction. Upon which I asked them if they could name another story, outside the bible, that contained two magical trees, a talking snake, and a god that acted as gardener that they might also consider "non-fiction." The problem here, of course, is twofold. On the one hand the students started with a false dichotomy. Certainly fiction and non-fiction are not the only categories of genre that one might use in examining the biblical text. But on the other hand, and certainly more to the point, their own dogmatic considerations forced them outside the bounds of proper academic reasoning.

While certainly the majority of biblical scholars would be as troubled by these students as I, the position of the New Secularists is that a large part of the biblical studies academy, in much more subtle pre-suppositional ways likewise smuggles in dogmatic or theological considerations as Smith's criticism of Gager exemplifies. The New Secularists are quite adamant in their uncovering and expulsion of such theological stowaways.

Thus we are witnessing a moment of cultural confluence where both a movement within the religious studies academy and one without seem to have points of mutual correspondence and support, what is implicit here is a significant level of ideological criticism at a variety of levels. It is, nevertheless, the very fact that this ideological criticism remains at the pre-theoretical level that shows the need for additional work. What seems clear is that there has yet to be proper theorization in all these movements of the concept of ideology. Jonathan Smith begins his essay "The Influence of Symbols Upon Social Change: A Place on Which to Stand" (1978) with Archimedes' aphorism, "Give me a place to stand, and I will move the world." Implicit in any theory of ideology is precisely the license to stand. It is only a properly positioned placing that allows the criticism of an ideological structure like religion in general or monotheisms or Christianity in particular.

It behooves us then to return to the work of ideological critics, for it is within the Marxist tradition that the notion of ideology has been most extensively analyzed. Marx himself began this movement focusing on ideology in his work "The German Ideology." His explanation of his starting point is instructive: "This method of approach is not devoid of premises.... Its premises are men, not in any fantastic isolation and rigidity, but in their actual, empirically perceptible process of development under definite conditions" (1970, 47.) This then serves as explanation of his more famous pronouncement from the paragraph before: "Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life" (47).

In the German Ideology we begin to see the initial contrast that will function, at least through Althusser, to undergird most of the Marxist tradition: the dichotomy between science and ideology. Marx states, "Where speculation ends - in real life - there real, positive *science* begins: the representation of the practical activity, of the practical process of development of men" (48, emphasis mine). Thus what Marx proposes is not empiricism (though it has empirical elements to it) but instead materialism which is understood in this early text to be grounded in a scientific realism.

I could spend more time engaging Marx, but I wish to quickly move to Althusser. Althusser created a much more sophisticated concept of ideology in his work by focusing on social reproduction. As is the case with Marx there was a presupposition of change; stasis takes work.

Capitalism is able to re-produce itself only through the reproduction of its core concepts in those institutions that populate it.

The reproduction of labour power thus reveals as its *sine qua non* not only the reproduction of its 'skills' but also the reproduction of its subjection to the ruling ideology or of the 'practice' of that ideology, with the proviso that it is not enough to say 'not only but also,' for it is clear that *it is in the forms and under the forms of ideological subjection that provision is made for the reproduction of the skills of labour power* (1972, 133, emphasis orig.)

What Althusser proposes then is institutionalization of ideology through two significant branches: on the one hand "Repressive State Apparatuses" (government, police, military, etc.) and "Ideological State Apparatuses" (institutions like religion, education, the media, etc.), each of which is ultimately a mechanism by which individuals acquire particular skills and in the process inculcate the dominant ideology.

Ideology in Althusser is also linked with subjectivity. Using the term "interpellation," Althusser argues that ideology functions by calling to individuals who then recognize themselves in that call. For him, the process is best exemplified in religion. The individual hears the ideological call: "You are a sinner, abandoned by God because of your sin, in need of salvation." Individuals thus hear themselves in that call, and the ideology then becomes a part of their subjectivity and implicitly makes them subject to the Supreme subject who is God and who requires a set of behaviors from them. Thus, Althusser says, people follow ideological aims without external compulsion; it has become part of who they are.

Althusser follows the distinction that Marx makes between science and ideology. Historical materialism is specifically not ideology, it is science. Thus historical materialism stands in contrast to ideology in the same way that the physical sciences or mathematics stand in contrast to ideology. It is from the basis of this scientific position that Althusser acquires the legitimacy by which the criticism of ideology can be validated. Althusser, like Marx, sees science as an extra-ideological construct, and the examination of ideology along with its critique is properly the domain of the science of historical materialism. Science functions, then, to strip away the ideological conceptions of society and to allow for a clear-eyed perspective on the world.

The New Secularists, though often without the tools of the Marxist tradition, also implicitly accept this same position, while the claim of religion scholars to be doing "science" is no longer in vogue, there inevitably comes a positioning in their work that goes to the brink of such naming. Hector Avalos, in his brilliantly incisive work *The End of Biblical Studies* (2007), spends some time arguing for pre-suppositional positivism (114) in his discussion of archaeology and goes further to state in his analysis of the (un)historical Jesus that "Any supposed defeats of positivist and naturalist epistemologies are an illusion" (195). Thus, while Avalos does not use the language "science **v** ideology," it is clear that his advocacy of the modernist epistemology of positivism is ultimately grounded in such a position. Here the argument is more often phrased in terms of naturalism **v** supernaturalism or evidence **v** apologetics.

Thus, we see that the point of connection between Marxism and the New Secularists lies in precisely this distinction between ideology and science. Science is that axiomatic point in which it is possible to move the world or at least deconstruct it. Is not this also a vulnerable point as well? Is not science just one more historical product? Has not post-modernism challenged us to see science as another discourse of power? Science may be a discourse of particular

usefulness perhaps, but ultimately it is a totalizing discourse that constrains freedom and engenders oppression just like any other ideology. Here I turn to the work of Slavoj Zizek.

Zizek has not only been extremely popular in the larger academy but his work has made its way into biblical studies as well. Additionally, in the past few years Zizek has produced several book-length treatments of Christianity in *The Puppet and the Dwarf* and *The Fragile Absolute*. But most importantly for our purposes here, Zizek has written about the problem hand in several works where he has addressed the problem of ideology.

Zizek has specifically tackled the dichotomy of science and ideology in a review essay of Alain Baidou's work. In this essay he takes on the idea of Althusser's distinction between science and ideology. He argues, in line with Baidou, that the sharp distinction between science and ideology is more typological than practical. "Not only is every science dependent on ideology that serves merely to designate its possible existence; there is also no discourse known as ideological except through the retroaction of science" (2006, 118). Zizek holds that the combination of science and ideology is processual. He talks about the "principle of unity in difference" (119). Thus for Zizek an appeal to science as a non-ideological discursive space is ultimately failed: science cannot be separated from ideology.

To understand Zizek's own take on ideological criticism it is important to see his debt to Lacan. Zizek, following Lacan, holds to the incompleteness of reality. Reality as we know it is not a totality, it is replete with gaps and holes. That lack of totalization is true even more so for ideology. There are in ideology also gaps and holes. Ideology often tries to pre-emptively fill these holes but they are always there.

Now these gaps in every ideology are part of the fact that ideology always fails to completely account for the world. The failure to properly symbolize the real means that there is always a remnant or supplement, which is that part of the real that escapes ideology. Those pieces of the real that exist in ideology and yet elude it are then the places that create the possibility for ideological criticism.

Within ideology, because precisely there is this moment where the real is left out, improperly symbolized, there is always the possibility of failure. For instance, in modern capitalism in the United States the number of people left out of the system—the unemployed, underemployed, or homeless—is significant. Those people constitute a systemic failure of the ideology and are part of the unsymbolized manifestation of the real. Capitalism, as most ideologies do, tries to preemptively account for this through a variety of different mechanisms. It suggests the people who fall through the systemic cracks are actually lazy, that they have failed to take advantage of opportunities given them, or that they are addicted to drugs or alcohol or mentally ill. The system then contains within it an explanation and excuse for its own failure.

But it is precisely these moments of failure, the improper symbolization of the real and the consequent irruption of the real, that creates the moment for ideological critique. It is not that we are ever outside of ideology, but rather that ideology is imperfect and it is in those moments when such imperfections are manifest that the opportunity arises to engage in the project of ideological criticism.

But there is a second aspect to ideology that is similar to this, which Zizek describes as cynicism. Zizek, the product of an Eastern Bloc country, lived in a place where the state ideology was very clear and carefully reinforced. And yet, he claims, it was believed by almost

no one. Thus at a certain level, belief, understood as intellectual assent to a set of propositions, is irrelevant.

What is key about ideology then is behaviors, or as Althusser put it, practices. Here the point is that by focusing on practices one may implement ideology and lack cognitive assent, Žižek uses the example of money. We all know that money is representative in nature, that dollar bills in themselves have no value, and they are merely wordless pieces of paper that have government markings. And yet this is not how we act. We act as if those pieces of paper truly are valuable in and of themselves rather than mere representations. This is ideology at its finest, it is what Marx had in mind, Žižek claims, in his notion of commodity fetishism, and is captured in the phrase, "they know, and yet they do it anyway" (1989, 33).

Certainly those of us who teach Bible can see this with clarity. We read texts with our students, such as Paul's diatribe about women's hair linking long hair to the very order of creation (1 Cor. 11:2-16) or Jesus' assent that sin is a justifiable cause for blindness at birth (John 9:1-12), or that a tower could be built that could reach heaven (Gen 11:1-9), and we may be astonished that our students' response to these texts is a collective shrug. They know. They know the Bible actually is an ancient book that is replete with superstition and horror that finds no place in modern life. And yet they behave as though that were not the case, as though it was ethical advice "ripped from the headlines," as it were. More to the point, perhaps, are the pastors who after several years of seminary know all the critical arguments about the text and yet when released into the pulpit preach essentially the same gospel that they did before they came to seminary. They know. And yet they behave as though they don't.

And here is the power of ideology. Its impact is not on the belief system *per se* but operates at an even more basic level. But precisely because there is a gap, an inherent logical problem, there is always the possibility of the re-emergence of the real. Thus as before there is perpetually space for ideological criticism.

Thus, following Žižek, I would maintain that while we can never escape from ideology, we need not find some place outside of ideology to do the work of ideological criticism; rather, the kingdom is within you. Ideological criticism is done in those places where ideological reproduction has failed, where the real has reasserted itself. The New Secularists seem at some level to understand this, when Mack confronts the black box of Christian origins in *Myth of Innocence*, he does so from within the discipline, carefully pulling together the scholarship that all who were fluent in that area were already aware of. It is within the gaps of that dominant ideology that the criticism of that ideology was possible, and that criticism exploits what is already known. The distinctions outlined above, like natural v. supernatural, then can be understood less as extra-ideological space and more as an indication of precisely the sort of gaps between modern society and the biblical world that allows for the kind of ideological criticism the New Secularists are implicitly or explicitly engaging in. That is a recipe for theoretical revolution, whether such a revolution will prevail remains to be seen.

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